

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Isamu Noguchi and Me

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I am aware of my presumption in bracketing the name of Isamu Noguchi with my own. This stone sculptor and garden designer, artist and landscape architect, dead in 1988 at the age of 84, is known throughout the world. His works grace museums in great cities. His sculptures routinely command high prices. Some of the furniture he designed is still in production. Two institutions are devoted to his art and thought and life: the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum on Long Island in New York and an extension of it, another 'garden museum,' in the village of Mure on the island of Shikoku in western Japan.

I am an American woman in her early sixties, a long-term resident of Japan working as a professor of English literature, language and culture at a small private university on Shikoku. Although I have published widely in my academic field and recently authored two crime fiction novels, I am certainly not well known outside literary circles. Yet I feel compelled to write about Noguchi because of odd parallels between his life and my own, coincidences that seem to link us. Most conspicuously, these include the improbable fact that we both once lived in a town called Rolling Prairie. It is located in the northwest corner of Indiana, a town founded nearly two hundred years ago whose average population of five hundred has scarcely varied in the past century. Rolling Prairie is a place so obscure and insignificant, so off the beaten track, that residents of neighbouring cities such as Michigan City and South Bend less than ten miles away have never heard of it.

The history of Rolling Prairie dates to 1831 when a settler named Ezekiel Provolt built a log cabin beside a large oak tree. He befriended the native Pottawatomie Indians, who often used to visit the Provolt family and drink from Provolt's well. A pioneer trail ran behind the cabin. Covered wagons would take this route in travelling from eastern Canada and Detroit to the Great Plains. This trail became US Highway 20. Houses and businesses grew up beside the road that bisected the community that became known as Rolling Prairie, its name reflective of its topography of gently undulating terrain. The Pottawatomie Indians eventually were assembled at a point called Plum Creek west of town and taken on a forced march to Kansas in what became known as 'The Trail of Tears'. Following their departure, the fertile land of the area was devoted to agriculture: local farmers raised cattle, grew soybeans and corn, wheat and hay, and there were many fruit orchards. The main street of Rolling Prairie, running perpendicular to Highway 20, is only two blocks long, terminating in a large grain elevator next to train tracks.

I never heard the name of Isamu Noguchi when I lived in Rolling Prairie from the age of three till eighteen, from 1957 till 1972. In fact, until I was thirty-five, I was ignorant of Isamu Noguchi as a designer and sculptor, let alone of the curious fact he had once lived in my former hometown. I had moved to Japan when I was 29 to take up a job at a private university, ended up marrying a Japanese farmer and, on falling pregnant with our first child, made the acquaintance of a Canadian woman who did occasional translation and interpretation work for the Noguchi Garden Museum in Mure. She introduced me to the artist and his work, and one day informed me of Noguchi's brief residence in Rolling.

I was astounded and incredulous. It seemed impossible. I had been the target of ribbing as a student at Indiana University: my cosmopolitan friends from Chicago and Indianapolis found it risible such a tiny village could exist, that it could bear such a picturesque name, that I could

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have spent my childhood there. The fact that another coincidence linked Noguchi and me – that we both subsequently made our home in Mure, a place halfway across the world from Indiana – seemed like icing on the cake.

Isamu Noguchi arrived in Rolling Prairie in August 1918. He was the illegitimate son of Yonejirō Noguchi, a poet acclaimed in America and in his native Japan, and Léonie Gilmour, an American woman who helped edit his work. The product of their brief liaison, Isamu had been born in California and then taken to Japan as a child of two by his mother, anxious for her mixed-race son to become acquainted with his Japanese heritage. On their arrival, Yonejirō Noguchi more or less ignored the two, forcing Léonie to eke out a difficult life in Tokyo giving English lessons, supporting herself and her son and another child, borne of a liaison with one of her students.

Léonie believed her son would become an artist who could benefit from his dual cultural heritage. She encouraged his creativity in any way she could. Isamu not only painted pictures, made sculptures and did gardening but Léonie also entrusted him with the design and supervision of a house she had built for the tiny family after the birth of Isamu's half-sister.

When Isamu was thirteen, his mother chanced upon a magazine advertisement for Interlaken Academy. It was an experimental school in northern Indiana founded by a local businessman, Edward Rumely, whose motto echoed her own pedagogical philosophy: 'Knowledge through Experience'. For Léonie, it must have seemed the answer to the problem of what to do with her son. Isamu had become an unruly, rebellious young boy, distrustful and suspicious because of bullying he had suffered at the hands of local children.

Isamu was ostracized because of being a 'half' – a mixed-race child in homogeneous Japan – and also illegitimate. First he refused to attend a Japanese school, claiming he wanted to be educated as an American. But when Léonie enrolled him in an English school in Yokohama, he was miserable there as well. At her wits' end, his mother briefly apprenticed the boy to a cabinetmaker, and Isamu learned carpentry.

It was at this difficult juncture that Léonie Gilmour decided to send Isamu to Indiana. Although Yonejirō suddenly decided to take an interest in the boy, turning up at the dock and trying to prevent his son's departure, Isamu boarded the steamship *Amerika-maru* in Yokohama bound for Seattle. He then took a succession of trains from the West Coast to Chicago, where he boarded a small line called the South Shore Railway that follows the south shore of Lake Michigan, disembarking at Rolling Prairie.

Noguchi was later to recall how he was overwhelmed by the vastness of the Indiana countryside when he left the train to walk two miles to Interlaken Academy. While Japan exhibited the exquisite beauty of a miniature garden, in America he found himself plunged into a panorama of boundless space, with a patchwork of broad flat fields extending to the horizon, all sheltering under a huge vault of blue sky.

Interlaken Academy was located a short distance out of Rolling Prairie and next to a small lake called Silver Lake. There was one wooden building that held the school offices and classrooms. The other facilities, including a gymnasium, a woodworking shop, a metalworking shop, a craft shop, a printing shop, and student dormitories, were log structures the students had built themselves. Noguchi had brought his own bag of carpentry tools from Japan and quickly won the admiration of teachers and fellow students for his skill at woodworking. At this time, Isamu was known as Sam Gilmour: 'Sam' was easier for Americans to pronounce than 'Isamu,' and he preferred taking his mother's rather than his father's surname.

But the boy's life was suddenly disrupted again. The school was closed by government order only one month after Noguchi's arrival, the premises to be commandeered by the American

military in the aftermath of victory in the First World War. The students and staff dispersed, but Isamu had nowhere to go. His mother had been informed of the school's closure but lacked the funds to fetch him back to Japan herself or to pay for the boy's passage to Tokyo.

For a month or so, Noguchi lived with a skeletal staff at the school, deputised to ride into Rolling in the morning on the school horse to fetch provisions. He says he became a sort of 'mascot' of the place as it was transformed into an army motor truck training camp. Then accommodation in Rolling was arranged for him, and he began attending the local school. He found himself ostracised again. This time it was for being a 'Jap'.

Isamu Noguchi lived in Rolling Prairie for nearly a year before Edward Rumely, detained shortly before the closure of the school on suspicion of harboring German sympathies, was released by President Coolidge's intervention. On returning to LaPorte, eight miles east of Rolling, where he was the heir to the big tractor manufacturing company that employed much of the town's work force, Rumely met Noguchi and arranged for him to board with Dr. Samuel Mack, the pastor of the Swedenborgian church his wife attended. Dr. Mack resided not far from the Rumely mansion, set in its own large park.

I have tried, but in vain, to discover which house in Rolling Prairie Noguchi lived in for that year between the closing of Interlaken Academy and his departure for LaPorte. It is possible it was mine. The house I moved into when I was three was constructed in the 1890s, one of three structures built in close proximity by three brothers: German immigrants. The houses are a short distance from the main street of the town and are nearly identical in architecture and design: each a large, solid, wooden dwelling with hardwood floors, tall ceilings and big rooms. Each has a basement and an attic, is fronted by a wide veranda complete with the requisite porch swing, and is surrounded by a big yard that is a grassy expanse dotted with maples, oaks, elms and weeping willows as well as bushes and plots of flowers.

I lived there with my parents and elder brother and two elder sisters. We children used to love our house: it was a place of mystery and surprises, hidey-holes and even a twisting, hidden back stairway. The attic was a huge space crammed with old furniture and boxes and a big dusty doll's house, while the basement was frightening and cold, festooned with spiders' webs, with a ledge running along one wall covered with jars of tomatoes and corn and peaches that my mother had canned.

The Rolling Prairie of the late '50s and early '60s was idyllic for a child. We would spend the long summer holidays playing outside all day. We climbed trees, played badminton and baseball, swam (there are many small lakes around the town), and rode our bikes up and down quiet wooded streets nearly empty of traffic. In winter we had fierce snowball fights and played 'fox and geese' in the heavy snow blanketing the town that would close our school and shut Rolling off from the outside world for up to two weeks. Best of all was 'Bozek's' in the centre of town. Owned and run by Polish immigrants, it was our favourite hangout, with its soda fountain, pinball machines, and booths with jukeboxes.

My father was the manager of the town's sole bank. He tried to reinvigorate the sleepy little community by organising harvest festivals and fish fries at the school. He and Mr. Stevens, the popular owner of the grocery store, made plans to get the community incorporated to attract more businesses to the area.

But disaster struck. Mr. Stevens was killed in a car accident. My parents had always argued but their quarrels became increasingly acrimonious. My father left when I was seven; my parents would divorce two years later. With Dad's departure, my family's circumstances changed dramatically. We had enjoyed a privileged status because Dad was the town's banker. We lost that status on his departure. Mom refused to ask for alimony and our standard of living suddenly

plunged. I knew of nobody else whose parents were divorced. It felt like a social stigma. Distraught at the breakdown of her marriage, Mom often closeted herself in her bedroom. We children needed to learn to fend for ourselves. Our lawn looked increasingly unkempt, our house began to look shabby, inside and out.

Within a few years, the town itself seemed to begin to fall apart. It had lost, in Mr. Stevens and my father, two dynamic figures who encouraged change and reform and had sought to get the town incorporated to ensure its prosperity. Another blow to the town was that the Rolling school was consolidated with four schools from neighboring communities. Once I began high school, I had to take a bus to a large modern complex complete with pool and auditorium located in a cornfield several miles away, joining a freshman class four times the size of my old class. With the loss of students walking to and from school and frequenting the businesses downtown, Rolling Prairie began to die.

After I'd lived in Japan for some time and begun to understand its customs, I realised my father had taken a curiously Japanese view of divorce. Here, when a couple separate, the erring partner, and it's usually the man, rarely stays in touch with the children. The view is that a mistake has been made and it's best soonest forgotten. We hardly saw Dad for several years after he left us. Then he remarried – as it happened, the daughter of Rolling's piano teacher – and I think it was at her insistence that we girls began seeing more of him, sometimes spending weekends at their home in central Indiana.

On reading Noguchi's biography, I found echoes of my own life in his. Noguchi's father, too, was conspicuous by his absence. As a boy, Noguchi had adored his mother until she abruptly thrust him from the family nest to make his way to a school halfway across the world. At this abrupt juncture, he had had to become self-reliant at an early age, as I felt I needed to do when my parents divorced and they seemed both to vanish from my life. While he had been the target of stones and insults both in Japan and in Indiana, I became a shy, scared child bullied by certain classmates. Like Noguchi, I never thought of asking for help. When I came to live in Japan I found the Japanese share my own view that we are essentially alone in life.

I think Noguchi and I both found companionship and solace in nature. I used to lie under the trees in our back yard, consoled by the beauty of the branches waving above me in the wind. Noguchi created gardens that sought to restore the harmony and perfect peace of the first, the original Eden.

Five years ago I was inspired, on a trip 'home' to visit family and friends, to try to visit places in Rolling and LaPorte connected to Noguchi. In my search for the young Japanese-American boy who had once lived where I had, who might have frequented my own haunts, I discovered the truth of the adage that the past is indeed a foreign country.

First, I spent a little time in Rolling Prairie. I had not been back for a number of years, and I was shocked and horrified at the changes time had wrought. Half the elementary school had burned down when I was twelve, and the town's destruction by fire seemed to be continuing apace, despite the fire station's having doubled in size. Since I had last been in Rolling, the hardware store, the five-and-dime and one bar had burned down. One of the town's two churches had been converted into a library and the other was derelict. The root-beer stand was gone. Bozek's was an empty building; when I peered through a dusty window, I saw empty shelves and rubbish littering the floor. The grocery had gone out of business. The houses near the main street looked run-down. Whoever had moved into our house following our departure had seen fit to cut down most of the trees. Highway 20, bypassing the town and only a short distance from my former home, seemed more heavily crowded with cars than I remembered, filling Rolling with the noise of traffic rushing by, oblivious to the town's very existence.

Rolling Prairie had become a ghost town, a shadow of its former self. The only two places that still seemed to be flourishing were the single remaining bar, packed with raucous customers, and a fire department that seemed signally to have failed to fulfill its *raison d'être*: it thrived while Rolling burned.

Before moving to Japan I had never heard of Noguchi, let alone registered that this world-renowned figure had a link with Rolling. I was similarly ignorant of the fact that a progressive boarding school named Interlaken Academy once had been located on the town's outskirts. The more research I did about Noguchi, the more I found how little I knew of my own hometown. I had no idea of its past. I wondered if I'd been sleepwalking, if I'd been blind, during the fifteen years I lived there.

I learned Rolling Prairie was nearing the height of its prosperity when Noguchi had lived there from 1918 to 1919. Most notably, it was the home of the Jones Garage. In the 1920s, the Jones Garage and Service Station operated by Basil and Orlando Jones, sons of the former town blacksmith, was a famous place where several Indianapolis 500 cars were constructed; Mauri Rose won the race with a car built there. Henry Ford was a friend of the owners and he was also an intimate of Edward Rumely, the founder of Interlaken Academy. Ford and the actor Clark Gable are rumored to have visited the Jones Garage on occasion.

Highway 20, which bypassed the town I grew up in, used to run straight through it from 1920 to 1940. Rolling had been a bustling, thriving place at that time, a popular destination for busloads of visitors who would frequent Bob's BBQ, a restaurant and dance hall that featured a live orchestra on Saturday nights; it also offered cabins for overnight stays in manicured grounds and rock gardens. Another attraction was the Peacock Fountain Inn, owned and operated by the Jacob Offenbacher family who had learned to cook in German and Swiss hotels. Live peacocks roamed the beautiful gardens of the inn, which closed when Mr. Offenbacher was killed in a car accident. A vacant lot at the end of Depot Street, near the town centre, became known as Hoover Park, named after the president; in the mid-1930s it became the site of free movies, shown on white sheets stretched between light poles, to cheer folk suffering the financial woes of the Great Depression. The practice of showing movies outside in Hoover Park continued until 1950 when it was discontinued because of the growing popularity of television.

Looking at a photograph of Rolling at the turn of the century, I saw it resembled a frontier town with its broad main street, raised wooden sidewalks and hitching posts. According to contemporary reports, between 1920 and 1940 it was a bustling community with at least ten gas stations, three grocery stores, a motel, bed-and-breakfast joints, two hardware stores and two doctors' offices, an appliance store and a pool hall. A trolley car linked South Bend, LaPorte and Michigan City to Rolling.

This whole layer of the town's existence had been submerged by the time I arrived at Rolling in 1957. Most of the businesses I've listed above had vanished without trace. There was a tumbledown stone building opposite my father's bank that bore a faded sign saying 'Jones Garage'. I was known as Wendy Jones then, and it annoyed me when classmates asked if it was a family building. Bob's BBQ, on the outskirts of town, was a ramshackle old place with a green roof missing many of its shingles. Little cottages crumbled away in a large neglected garden. The Fountain Inn was just a big old house whose paint was peeling and a garden that was running wild; at times it seemed inhabited, at others, deserted. Hoover Park had reverted to being an empty lot. I heard rumors that films used to be shown there but I didn't believe them. There was no trolley service linking Rolling with anywhere else. The South Shore link with Chicago was discontinued in the early '90s for lack of passengers.

The story I imbibed as a child was that the town's only claim to fame was that it had unusually heavy snowfall because of a curious meteorological phenomenon. I was told that the prevailing winds that blew east off Lake Michigan from Chicago passed by the steel mills of Gary, with the pollution particles from the mills getting covered by precipitation and reaching the requisite heaviness to fall just as they arrived at Rolling. Was any of this true? I don't know. But I do remember that, in winter, we had twice or sometimes even three times as much snow as neighboring towns.

On my visit five years ago, after I had seen Rolling and mourned the death of my old hometown, I sought out Interlaken Academy. I had never heard of it or of Silver Lake when I lived in Rolling. I soon realized why. Silver Lake is on private property, hidden behind high walls on a country road to the west of the town. When I was small, the walls bounded a large, imposing structure: St. Joseph Novitiate. Only gabled roofs and chimneys were visible from the road I took each week on my way to piano lessons. I learned that the novitiate had been built on the land once occupied by Interlaken Academy after the church had bought the property. The novitiate was later transformed into a private, expensive Roman Catholic boarding school for young men considering entering the priesthood.

On the day I visited the gates of the wall happened to be open. I drove through, expecting to be challenged and stopped at any moment. It was August and apparently the school was on summer vacation for the place was deserted. I found Silver Lake to be a substantial body of water surrounded by trees and pleasant pastureland, cows and sheep grazing in the distance. Some farm machinery lay scattered around but there was nothing left, it appeared, of the buildings of the experimental school Noguchi had attended.

Next, I made my way to LaPorte, where Noguchi had lived from the age of fourteen to eighteen, attending LaPorte high school and graduating as the valedictorian of his class. I was dismayed to find that, like Rolling, it had fallen on hard times. The industrial park outside the town had empty factories. The main street of the prosperous manufacturing town I had known as a girl was full of vacant buildings for sale. The cinema I used to frequent with a girlfriend was closed, as was the big department store to which my mother used to take my sisters and me to buy our school wardrobes each year. A large new hospital near the old courthouse seemed the only hive of lively activity.

I located the Mack house where Noguchi had occupied an attic room for four years while he attended the local high school. One Noguchi biography described it as a gray three-story wooden house with a sharply angled roof in a middle-class residential neighborhood; it was solid and unprepossessing but filled with books. The house I found looked dilapidated and untended; it needed painting and the grass of the lawn was long and filled with weeds. Broken toys littered the yard.

I then made my way to the large yellow brick building that occupies a city-long block on Rose Street and is still known locally as the Scott-Rumely Mansion (originally built and owned by Emmet Scott, Edward Rumely's father-in-law, who was a former mayor of LaPorte). It was the same story: time had been unkind. The building was imposing but derelict; it had obviously not been occupied for many years. There was a general air of neglect about it and the park in which it stood. (I am glad to report that two years after my visit Indiana Landmarks purchased the house and its premises, thus rescuing them from foreclosure and possible demolition.)

What remains of us when we die? Is it a case of the tale of Ozymandias, that the proud monuments we erect to proclaim our achievements to posterity are eventually obliterated, buried by the sands of time? From observing the changing fortunes of Rolling Prairie and LaPorte I see how even a decade or two can transform familiar landscapes into unrecognizable parodies of

themselves. The maple trees for which LaPorte is famed and Rolling's undulating landscape of fields of corn and soybeans remain under the characteristic big blue midwestern sky, but most man-made objects in the vicinity of these two communities have drastically changed or simply disappeared since I lived in the area, let alone since Isamu Noguchi did.

Art may save us or at least preserve fragments of what we were or made. Rolling Prairie's post office has been moved into a new building near the site of the old, and one of its walls is covered with murals depicting the history of the area, from the glaciers that receded north 16,000 years ago, leaving unusually fertile land in this region to the south and east of the southern tip of Lake Michigan, to the apex of the town's fortunes in the early to mid-twentieth century. All the famous sights are there: the Provolt homestead, Plum Creek, the pioneers in their covered wagons traveling westward, the Jones Garage, the Peacock Fountain Inn, and Hoover Park.

Noguchi does not feature in the Rolling Prairie post office murals – people in the town are still ignorant of his existence or that he once lived locally – but his residence in LaPorte has been commemorated through five stamps issued by the US Post Office in 2004, celebrating the work of an artist who was a 1922 LaPorte high school graduate. His sculpture entitled 'The Sea Lions' is displayed at the school, given to it by its 1932 graduating class.

Perhaps as Shakespeare asserts in his famous sonnet, it is only art that has the possibility of surviving the predations of time, but then only for as long 'as men can breathe and eyes can see'. Stone sculptures and garden designs, postage stamps and post office murals, biographies and essays: all are our attempts to stave off the inevitable. However long these may serve to commemorate Isamu Noguchi, his life in the northwest corner of Indiana in the early twentieth century has become yet another mysterious, unreadable page of a past we can only see dimly, if at all.

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